



An Exploration of Internal and External Factors Contributing to Reading Difficulties Among Sixth-Grade Elementary School Students

Dwi Heryanto¹, Kartika Shinta Puspita Anggreini²

^{1,2} Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Correspondence Email: dwi_heryanto@upi.edu

ABSTRACT

Reading is a fundamental skill that serves as the foundation for students' overall academic success. However, reading difficulties are still found among upper-grade elementary school students who should already have mastered basic or early reading skills. This study aims to identify the internal and external factors that influence the reading difficulties experienced by a sixth-grade elementary school student. This study employed a case study approach, with the classroom teacher and the student's parents serving as supporting informants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observation, and open-ended questionnaires, which were then analyzed using methodological triangulation. The results indicate that the internal factors most influential on the student's reading difficulties are cognitive aspects (memory and concentration) and psychological aspects (low self-confidence and anxiety), accompanied by the student's low intrinsic motivation to read. Meanwhile, external factors were dominated by limited parental support and a lack of reading habits at home, the absence of specialized programs, limited time for intensive tutoring at school, and a social environment that has not yet fostered a strong culture of literacy. These internal and external factors interact to contribute to the reading difficulties experienced by students. It is hoped that these findings will provide insights for teachers, parents, and schools in designing more comprehensive and collaborative learning strategies or interventions to address the reading difficulties experienced by an upper-grade elementary school student.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skills are fundamental skills that are the foundation for the entire lifelong learning process. Reading literacy should be instilled from the elementary education level, because students who have good literacy skills tend to be more able to capture information and actively participate in the learning process (Susanti, 2022). UNESCO emphasizes that reading literacy is not only related to the ability to recognize letters and words, but also the foundation for the development of digital skills, critical thinking and active participation in the digital era (UNESCO, 2025). Reading difficulties are still a serious challenge that occurs in various countries, global data shows that hundreds of millions of children are still struggling to reach the minimum level of proficiency in reading, writing, and numeracy (UNESCO, 2025).

This problem is also felt in Indonesia. This condition is reinforced by the PISA results showing that only a small percentage of students in Indonesia are able to achieve basic reading skills at level two, far below the average of other countries (PISA, 2022). The low achievement of reading literacy cannot be separated from language skills as one of the fundamental aspects in children's cognitive and social development. Through language, children can express their thoughts, understand information, and interact with the surrounding environment. Language skills include four aspects, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Hapsari, 2019). Of these four aspects, reading skills are very important skills in the learning process and acquisition of new knowledge, because reading is the basis of abilities that must be possessed from various other fields of science (Purba et al., 2023). Reading can also be understood as a developmental process that takes place continuously through various stages, so that consistent reading habits from an early age are an important prerequisite for improving continuous education (Fikriyah et al., 2020).

In the context of basic education, reading is the main bridge for students in understanding the concept of learning concepts in various fields of study, so that students who do not have good reading skills can risk having difficulties in learning other subjects (Gumono, 2014). However, the problem of reading literacy in Indonesia does not only occur in students in the early grades, but also in students in the upper class of elementary school, where high grade students should have been able to master reading skills well, starting from word recognition, reading fluency, to reading comprehension, as a provision to enter the secondary education level, and are no longer at the beginning reading stage (Daniel et al., 2024).

There is a real gap between ideal conditions and real conditions that occur in the field. Ideally, high-grade students should have mastered reading comprehension skills, which are able to understand, master, and grasp information or the content of a reading (Frans et al., 2023). However, the reality on the ground shows different conditions. A preliminary study conducted through interviews with grade VI teachers at one of the elementary schools in Cimahi city revealed that there is a significant reading gap among students. There is still a grade VI elementary school student who has not reached the stage of reading comprehension that should have been mastered by students in high grades.

The difference between the initial reading stage and the comprehension reading stage is important to understand conceptually. Reading begins with more emphasis on the technical ability of decoding, which is the ability to convert written symbols into meaningful language sounds (Fatmasari et al., 2022), while reading comprehension requires students to be able to find out the meaning or discovery of evaluation information and reflection on the content. or

text that has been read (Nation, 2019).

In connection with these problems, difficulties regarding the reading background experienced by students can basically be analyzed through two factors, namely internal factors and external factors. Internal factors can be influenced by the student's level of intelligence, interest, and motivation (Annala dan Safran, 2023), including age, gender, attitudes toward reading, and students' psychological needs (Mustadi and Amri, 2020). On the other hand, external factors can be influenced by the student's social environment, both at home and at school, with the family environment playing a very important role, encompassing family background, the way parents educate at home, and the daily behavior of students in the home environment. In addition, external factors regarding students' reading interest can also be one of the factors that can affect the difficulties experienced by students. Students' reading skills, such as vocabulary mastery and reading fluency, can not only develop optimally without adequate external support (Cadalay and Dilawi, 2025). Therefore, internal factors and external factors can always support in shaping the difficulties and reading skills experienced by students.

However, most research on reading difficulties still focuses on low-grade students, while similar phenomena in upper-grade students have not been explored in depth and have not been extensively researched. In addition, previous studies have tended to analyze internal and external factors separately. This study offers novelty by analyzing these two factors simultaneously in grade VI students who are still in the initial reading stage. Thus, this study aims to analyze internal and external factors that can affect the reading difficulties of grade VI elementary school students, so as to gain a more complete understanding of how the condition of internal factors and external factors can affect reading difficulties experienced by a grade VI elementary school student.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive qualitative type and case study design. The case study design was chosen by the researcher with the aim of in-depth analysis of the internal and external factors that affect the reading difficulty of a grade VI elementary school student.

The main subject in this study is an elementary school grade VI student in one of the schools in Cimahi City, West Java who still has difficulty reading at the beginning. Teachers and parents of students are involved as supporting informants to strengthen and complement the data obtained during the research. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling techniques, so they had special criteria.

Data is collected through several data collection techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, and students to explore in depth about internal and external factors related to students' reading difficulties. Second, non-participatory observation is carried out to directly observe students' behavior and their learning environment. Third, an open questionnaire was conducted with the aim of obtaining additional information about reading interests and motivations, learning difficulties, reading habits, family support, and the influence of the social environment.

The data obtained was then analyzed using a qualitative analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman, namely the stage of data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawn. In addition, this study also applies triangulation methods by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations and open questionnaires.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Internal Factors Affecting Students' Reading Difficulties

Internal factors are conditions that come from within students. In this study, the internal factors studied include cognitive aspects, motivation and enjoyment interest in reading activities, as well as students' psychological conditions.

a. Cognitive Factors (Memory, Concentration, and Intellectual Ability)

Based on data obtained from teachers and parents, it shows that students take longer and repeated explanations to understand the learning material compared to their classmates, and tend to quickly forget the material that has just been explained. Students also show difficulty in maintaining concentration, which is evident from the habit of daydreaming that is repeated during learning. The difficulties experienced by students not only have an impact on their reading skills, but also have an impact on all other subjects.

[Piaget and Inhelder \(1969\)](#), a child's reading ability is closely related to his or her stage of cognitive development. Elementary school-age children are generally at the concrete operational stage, where students are able to think logically about concrete things, but still have difficulties with abstract things ([Marinda, 2020](#)). The findings of this study are also in line with research by [Pertiwi and Pratikno \(2024\)](#), which suggests that low intellectual ability can cause students to take longer to absorb information and need more intensive guidance than other students. From perspective *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) by [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#), the gap between actual abilities and potential abilities of students shows that the need for structured exercises and intensive guidance, especially in the decoding aspect, needs to be applied to students, not just repetition of material.

b. Motivation, Interest and Enjoyment Factors for Reading

Furthermore, the findings regarding students' motivation and reading interest showed the opposite results. On the one hand, students show a positive attitude towards reading activities and consider reading as a fun and useful activity. However, on the other hand, students do not show intrinsic motivation to practice reading independently, so students only rely on external motivations such as praise or rewards to motivate them in reading. The findings of this study are in line with the motivation theory developed by [Deci dan Ryan \(1985\)](#), regarding dependence on rewards or extrinsic motivations will only weaken the intrinsic motivation possessed by the individual so that he will only move or act when rewarded. The findings of this study reinforce previous research by [Budiarti and Haryanto \(2016\)](#), which states that high motivation of students can play an important role in encouraging students to try to overcome the difficulties they face. Findings by [Handayani et al \(2025\)](#) show that learning discipline and learning motivation have an important influence on students' reading skills. Research by Annela and Safran in (2023), found that students with average intelligence but high motivation were able to overcome reading difficulties better than students who had high intelligence but had low motivation. The findings of previous research reinforce that low motivation is one of the internal factors that contribute to the reading difficulties experienced by students.

c. Psychological Factors (Self-Confidence and Anxiety)

On the psychological aspect, students said that they felt nervous, anxious, and afraid of making mistakes when asked to read or answer questions in front of the class. This condition shows that students have low confidence in academic learning activities. These findings are in line with research by Nice, et., al., in [2022](#), which states that emotional factors such as

shyness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence can hinder the development of students' reading skills. The nervousness and fear of being wrong experienced by students seem to hinder students' courage in trying, so that students tend to be passive or inactive during learning activities. However, interestingly, the low confidence of students in the learning process is inversely proportional to the confidence of students during socialization activities. Students have high confidence in socializing, students do not show withdrawal from their environment and interact reasonably with their friends. This shows that the psychological obstacles experienced by students have an effect on the learning process, so they are not the personalities possessed by students in general.

Overall, when viewed from the three internal factors that have been studied, cognitive and psychological aspects appear to be the most dominant factors in influencing reading difficulties experienced by students, followed by low motivation for students to read independently.

3.2. External Factors Affecting Students' Reading Difficulties

External factors are conditions that come from outside the student and can affect the development of students' reading skills. In this study, the external factors to be studied include the family environment, the school environment, and the social environment of students.

a. Family Environment Factors

Based on the results of interviews with parents and students, it shows that learning facilities at home, such as learning places and the availability of books are adequate in supporting students' reading skills. However, the limited time that parents have in assisting students with their learning is one of the external factors that most affect the difficulties experienced by students. Parents' busyness at work causes learning assistance to only be provided occasionally, such as on holidays or when parents have free time. In the interview, parents also said that there is no routine reading schedule that is applied in the home environment or family environment, so students do not have a routine reading habit at home. [Bernstein \(1971\)](#) states that children who grow up in an environment with low or limited literacy tend to have low written language skills. These findings are also in line with research by [Julianty, et., al., in 2023](#), who found that students who have difficulty reading are influenced by their parents' busyness, so that students receive less attention and assistance from studying at home. [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) About the concept *Zone of Proximal Development*, suggests that the child needs help from others who are more capable of reaching his or her potential developmental level. The limited assistance provided by parents causes students not to get the guidance needed to develop their reading skills optimally.

b. School Environment Factors

In the school setting, the findings show that schools do not yet have specific programs designed to deal with students who have difficulty reading. Intensive teacher guidance to students who are experiencing difficulties is also rarely carried out due to limited time at school. This condition can be understood through the concept of scaffolding in *Zone of Proximal Development* [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#), where the teacher plays the role of a more knowledgeable other who provides help in a structured and also gradual manner. However, the guidance given to students is only in the form of short questions and answers after school, so the scaffolding process cannot run optimally. The results of the observation also show that the learning media used by teachers is still relatively limited and less varied, teachers use more textbooks in learning, so they do not provide varied stimulation for

students. These findings support research by Yuniasari and Kunaifah (2025), which identifies time constraints as one of the factors in inhibiting reading difficulties in elementary school students.

c. Social Environmental Factors

The social environmental factors in this study are related to students' habits outside school hours and the influence of peers. Students revealed that the noisy atmosphere is one of the main causes of loss of concentration when reading. This finding is in line with the psycholinguistic perspective which is one of the foundations of this study, namely by Chaer and Agustina (2010) which explains that a person's language acquisition cannot be separated from the social context in which he interacts and grows. Data from questionnaires and interviews also showed that students' after-school activities were more spent playing with friends and using mobile phones than reading, which suggests that students' social habits have not formed a supportive reading culture at home or in the home environment. These findings are in line with Hanum, et., al., (2025), which suggests that peers have a strong role in shaping students' reading habits, so friendship has an important place in shaping the motivation and reading habits of elementary school students.

Based on the analysis of the three external factors, family environmental factors, especially the limitations of parental assistance and low reading habits at home, are the most dominant external factors in influencing reading difficulties experienced by students. Other factors reinforce the limitations of school handling and limited time in intensive guidance by teachers, as well as the social environment that does not support a strong literacy culture also affect the reading difficulties experienced by students.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the reading difficulties experienced by a sixth grade student in this study are influenced by internal factors and related external factors. Internally, the aspects that most affect students' reading difficulties are cognitive aspects, especially memory and concentration, as well as psychological aspects, especially low academic confidence, which is followed by low intrinsic motivation of students in reading. From the external side, the family environment is the most influential factor, especially the limitation of parental assistance and low reading habits at home, followed by the limitations of school handling of students who have reading difficulties and limited time for intensive teacher guidance, as well as the social environment that has not formed a strong literacy culture.

These findings show that internal and external factors do not stand alone, but can reinforce each other in shaping the reading difficulties experienced by students. Therefore, the handling of reading difficulties in high-grade students in elementary school requires collaboration between teachers, parents, and schools, accompanied by strengthening students' intrinsic motivation.

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